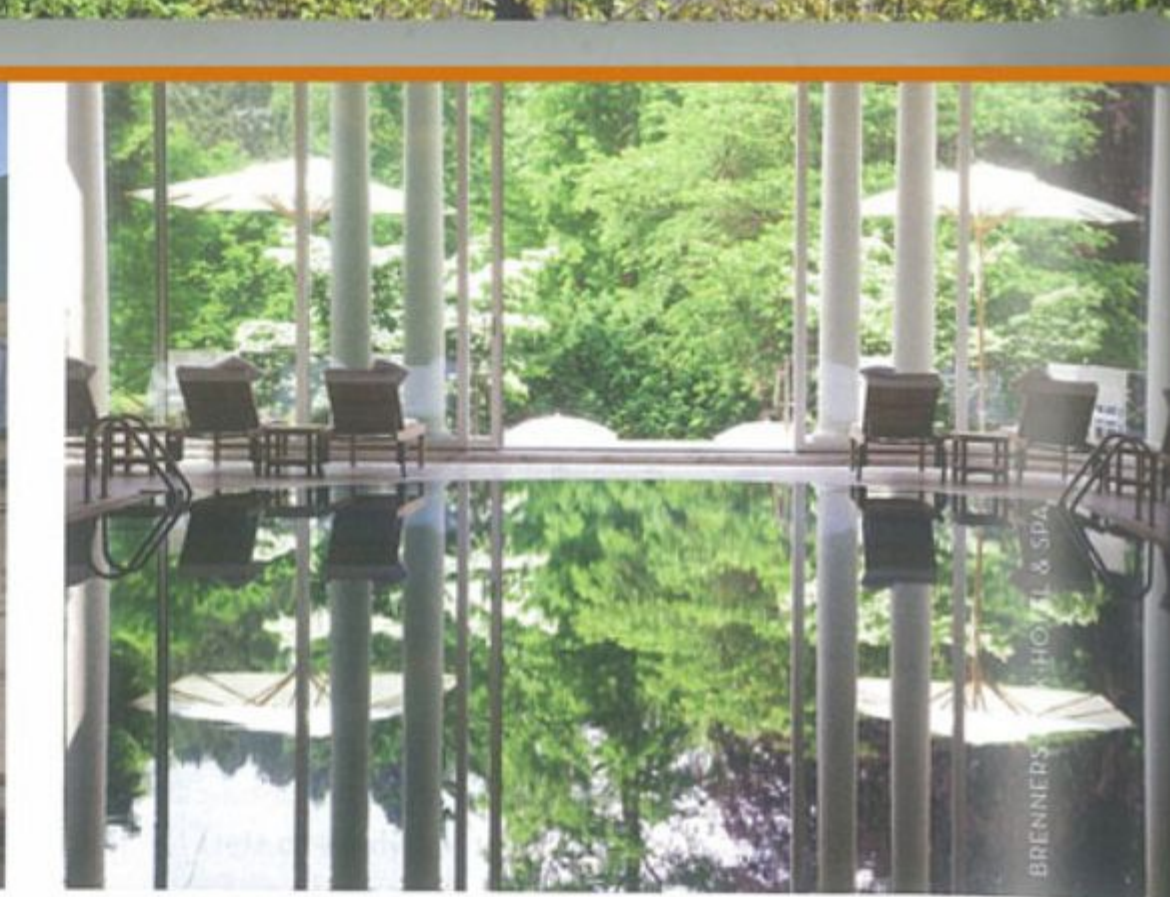
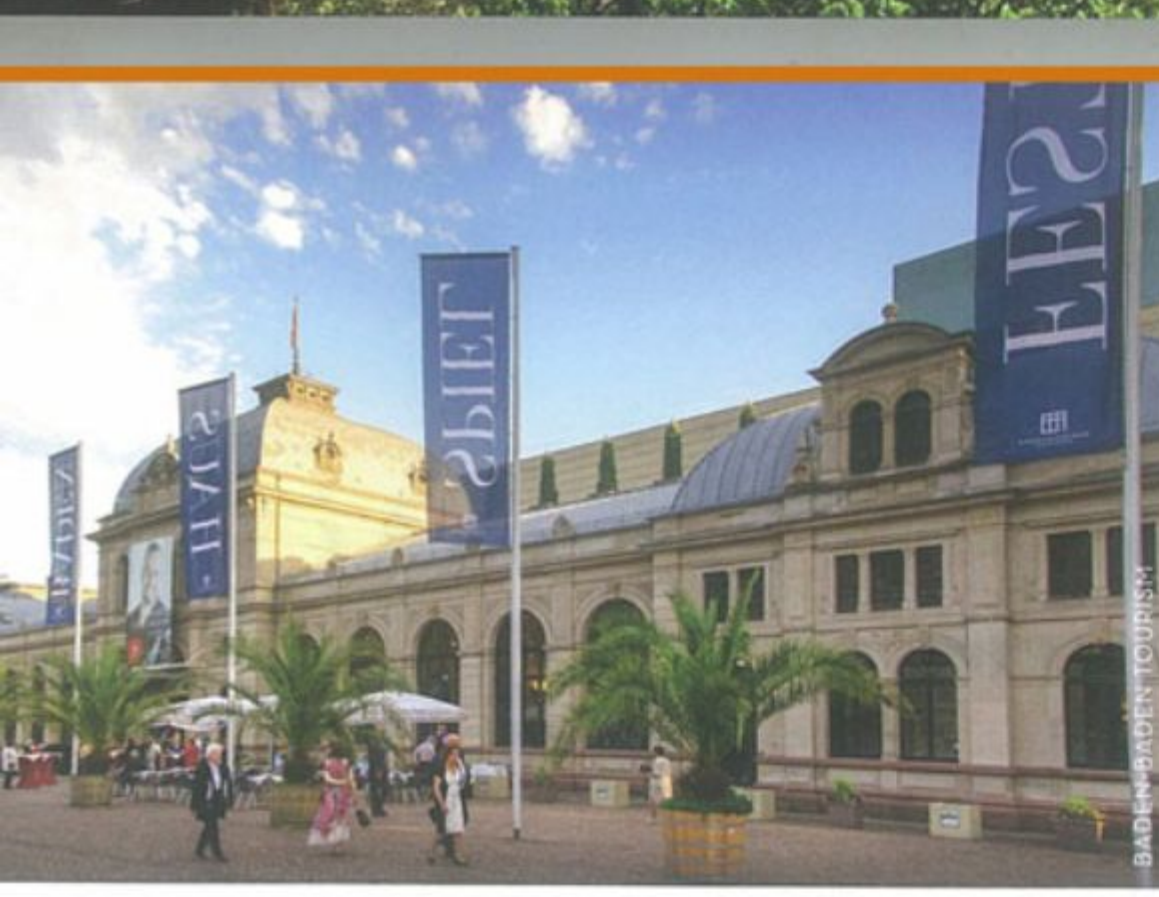


BATHS, BLACKJACK & BEYOND

From cutting-edge museums to world-class concert halls and striking belle-époque edifices, Germany's renowned spa town Baden-Baden throws up surprises at every turn for Fareeda Kanga



Thermal Treats

You cannot visit Baden-Baden and shy away from its 2,000-year-old wellness lineage that dates back to the Roman Emperor Caracalla, whose legions discovered the thermal springs and named the area *Aquae Aureliae*. At Caracalla, 12 underground hot springs that rise up from a depth of 2,000 metres send up 800,000 litres of steaming water a day, and this water is widely known for its healing properties.

While you can slip into a swimsuit at Caracalla, bathing is strictly in the nude at Friedrichsbad. If you muster up the courage to shed both your clothes and inhibitions, you are in for a treat. Options abound, including warm and hot dry saunas, ice baths, thermal pools and the traditional hard or soft soap-brush massage. But what's really impressive is the design of the Friedrichsbad spa. An 1877 architectural jewel, this 'temple of well-being' was hailed the most modern bathing establishment in Europe, and its ornate copper and terracotta facade adds character to the neo-Renaissance-style structure.

Of Melodies And Museums

Although the most common *raison d'être* of a visit here is wellness, what many don't realise is that Baden-Baden has much more to offer than a curative soak. One would hardly imagine that Europe's second-largest concert and opera hall, the Festspielhaus, would wind up in a town with 61 per cent forest cover! A glance through a local magazine displays the impressive lineup of stars performing at the town's music hall – a veritable who's who of the Western classical world.

Here, you can witness the likes of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, musicians like Anne-Sophie Mutter and ballet troupes of repute. Interestingly enough, it turns out that some locals thought it crazy to build a concert hall seating over 2,500 when the town's population itself was only 60,000. Luckily, the town planners ignored them, and today, thanks to the 300 plus performances to choose from every year, every music aficionado's calendar has Festspielhaus pencilled in.

Music aside, four museums add to the city's repertoire of

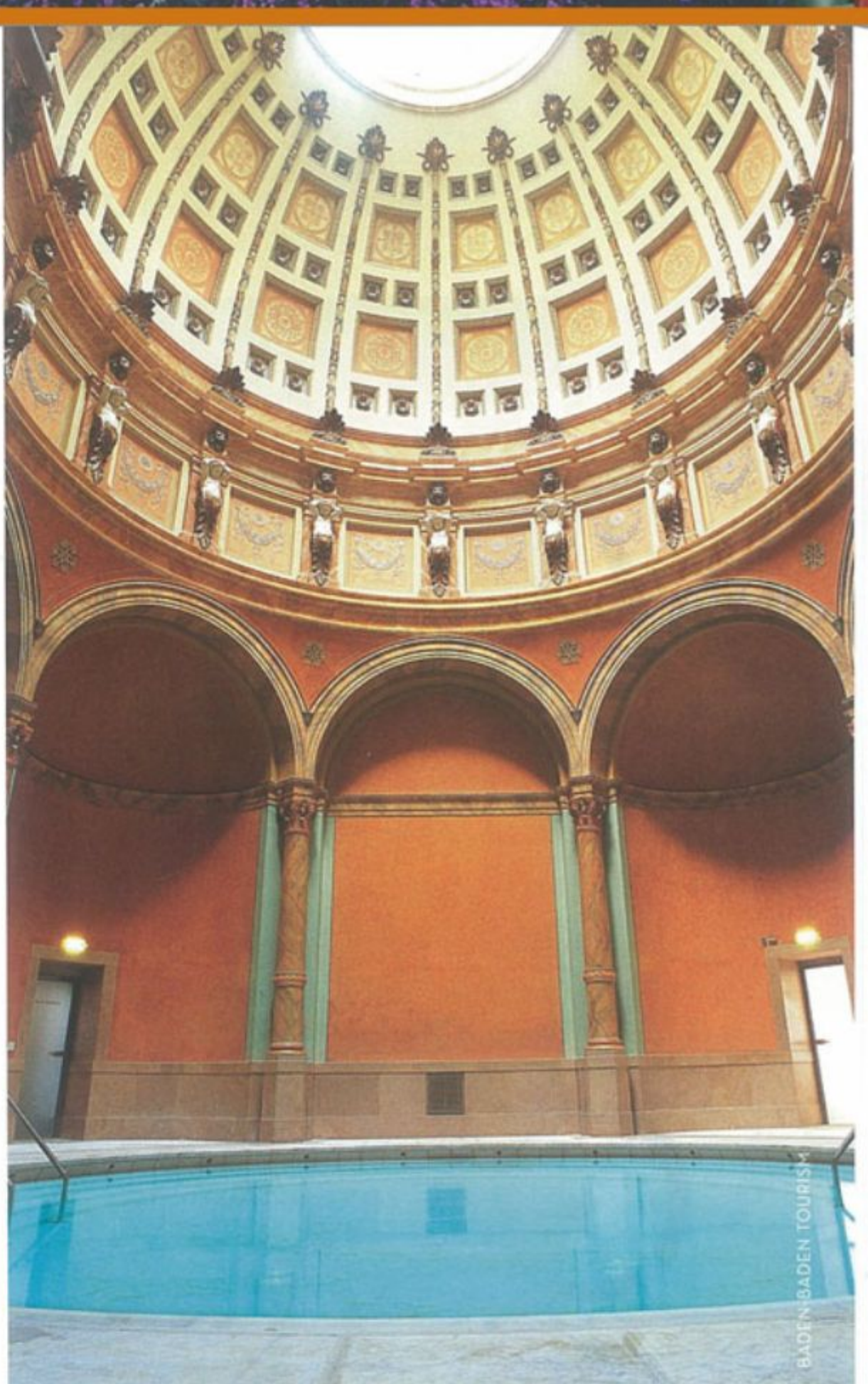


cultural attractions. In 2004, famed American architect Richard Meier built the Museum Frieder Burda, located in the middle of the Lichtentaler Allee. A symbiosis of both modern and contemporary art, the pristine, white ultra-modern exterior is a stunning contrast to the belle-époque homes that it neighbours. This sleek, white temple of design pours light into the building, illuminating a private collection of 550 paintings and sculptures as well as exclusive exhibitions of international guest artists. Works by Pablo Picasso, Gerhard Richter and Neo Rauch, among others, also hang in the galleries.

There's the gorgeous Fabergé Museum too, but it has odd seasonal timings, so it can be tricky to schedule a visit. If you do, however, manage to gain entry, you will be left spellbound by the 700 creations from master craftsman Peter Carl Fabergé as well as the world's largest collection of cigarette cases, miniature figures and copper and brass articles.

Lavish Living

Some of the best hotels in Europe are family-run, invariably handed down from father to son, and it is no different for The Brenners Park-Hotel & Spa, run by the Oetker family. One of the few remaining grand spa hotels in Europe, the five-star property overlooks the Lichtentaler Allee, where European royalty and society ladies once leisurely ambled down a promenade lined with bouquets of vibrant flowers and manicured hedges. Brenners is an institution, with the columns and frescoed walls of the swimming pool (that is glass-enclosed and heated) resembling a Pompeian style that would have made the ancient Romans feel at home and with a spa that offers state-of-the-art treatments, with a separate medical and well-being wing.



OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: THE FESTSPIELHAUS; THE POOL AT BRENNERS PARK-HOTEL & SPA
OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW: THE KURHAUS
ABOVE: THE FRIEDRICHSBAD SPA
LEFT: CASINO BADEN-BADEN



On The Cards

There are few words to describe the opulence and grandeur of the casino at spa resort and conference complex Kurhaus. A dazzling jewel-box of a structure, built over 190 years ago, its grand chandeliers, Louis XV-style decor and gilt-and-stucco elegance are as beautiful as the sophisticated European women sashaying around the tables.

Plenty has been said and written about the casino from folklore. Tsar Nicholas II, the story goes, arrived here in 1902 with 20 million roubles' worth of jewels, only to leave penniless a week after. It is also said that the inspiration for Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky's novella *The Gambler* (1866) was based on his experience here. Although there's an ATM on the premises should you run out of cash, if you aren't in the mood for more baccarat or blackjack, just stroll through this extravagant space and soak in the heady mood. ♣

SCAPES | TRAVEL

The temptation to call Baden-Baden 'quaint' is compelling. After all, this fairytale town, at the foothills of the Black Forest region in Germany, is home to a mere 60,000 residents and probably has more horse carriages than cars transporting locals and tourists across its length and breadth.

But, really, it would be unjust to refer to any place which houses one of Europe's finest modern art collections and its second-largest concert hall as well as the world's most beautiful casino as simply 'quaint'. So, in a town of superlatives, it's hard to know where to start the journey of discovery.

Baden-Baden is known as the world's most famous spa town. So famous, in fact, that through the years and until today, it has attracted the rich and famous from around the world, including the likes of Napoleon III, Queen Victoria, Victor Hugo, Nikolai Gogol and Marlene Dietrich. While there are many reasons to visit this charming town, it makes sense to start with a trip to its two prominent public spas – Caracalla and Friedrichsbad.

